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Making the Academic Writing Process Explicit for Doctoral Students in the Social Sciences

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to clarify the academic writing process and stages of publication for novice scholars. With doctoral student mentorship being highly dependent on relationships with faculty mentors, the quality and type of mentorship received varies widely. We designed this article to provide a shared starting point for new scholars trying to navigate the writing and publication process. We use our experiences as three newly tenured faculty members to provide some guidance for students. Additionally, this article adds to the existing body of knowledge on the academic writing process by bringing some hidden curriculum and norms to the forefront and making the information available to all students. Article highlights include four areas of focus of academic publishing: (a) the presentation to publication process; (b) journal choice and preparing for journal submission; (c) revision as a communal process; and (d) the journal response. Within this article, we have recommended several places where new scholars can make decisions ranging from where to submit papers, who and how to ask for help, and ways that they can respond to reviewers.

Keywords

academic writing, publication process, doctoral students

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Making the Academic Writing Process Explicit for Doctoral Students in the Social Sciences

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The purpose of this article is to clarify the academic writing process and stages of publication for novice scholars. With doctoral student mentorship being highly dependent on relationships with faculty mentors, the quality and type of mentorship received varies widely. We designed this article to provide a shared starting point for new scholars trying to navigate the writing and publication process. We use our experiences as three newly tenured faculty members to provide some guidance for students. Additionally, this article adds to the existing body of knowledge on the academic writing process by bringing some hidden curriculum and norms to the forefront and making the information available to all students. Article highlights include four areas of focus of academic publishing: (a) the presentation to publication process; (b) journal choice and preparing for journal submission; (c) revision as a communal process; and (d) the journal response. Within this article, we have recommended several places where new scholars can make decisions ranging from where to submit papers, who and how to ask for help, and ways that they can respond to reviewers.

Keywords: academic writing, publication process, doctoral students

Introduction

The ivory tower model of academia has long been criticized for controlling who gets access to “elite” knowledge and opportunities (Buckley, 2012; Margolis & Romero, 1998). While this conversation is typically positioned about higher education and its relationship to society, in doctoral programs, inequalities based on student identity, family history and affordances, and field of study continue to create unequal access to academic knowledge (Elliot et al., 2016; Eraut, 2007; Margolis & Romero, 1998; Romero, 2017; Villanueva et al., 2018). Students are often unaware of the knowledge they lack about academic socialization, or the hidden curriculum of being successful in academic spaces (Apple & King, 1977; Cotton et al., 2013). Faculty, and especially faculty of color, regularly take on the invisible labor of mentoring students on these skills, attitudes, and behaviors of academic work in uncompensated faculty work (Hernandez et al., 2015; Settles et al., 2019). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us how vulnerable lines of communication are, and faculty labor has been stretched to a breaking point during the pandemic and the recent social upheavals (Anwer, 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Rashid & Yadav, 2020). Therefore, we are positioning this article as a form of knowledge delivery accessible to doctoral students in the social sciences, for whom one-on-one mentoring or faculty support is not available or effective.

We focus this article on the academic process of scholarship and publishing, acknowledging this is but one of many aspects of academic work that could benefit from further unpacking and clarity for many students. In particular, the publication process is often a mystical “black box” for students coming into doctoral studies (Elliot et al., 2016; Eraut, 2007).

As most students do not have access to, or even awareness of, scholarly practice and publishing in undergraduate and master's studies, this topic becomes one of confusion and frustration. Doctoral programs are meant to be a space of socialization and learning about this type of work, but access to this knowledge is not equal across all students both in terms of differences between programs, and because of bias, both conscious and subconscious, based on students' identities (Margolis & Romero, 1998; Romero, 2017; Villanueva et al., 2018). Therefore, in this article, we seek to make the publication process transparent and hope it serves as a supplement to other existing resources and formal mentoring for students engaging in this work. We have designed this article as a means to share our personal experiences and approaches to scholarship and academic work. Due to our areas of expertise, we are targeting social science research and academic work, with a general focus on the individual researcher interested in producing and publishing scholarly writing.

Literature Review

Much has been published on the publication process for graduate and doctoral students (Rich, 2013; Shelby & Okilwa, 2011; Twombly, 2005). Whether the topics be on procrastination, binge writing, and developing healthy writing routines (Boice, 1989, 2000; Pacheco-Vega, n.d.); developing steady and predictable writing habits (Sword, 2017); creating writing groups (Chittum & Bryant, 2014; Harris, 2006); or prioritizing and executing writing goals (Mikhailova & Nilson, 2007), there is ample literature across a range of topics related to the publication process. There are also many "how to" books or book chapters on publishing in academia (e.g., Aitchison, 2014; Goodson, 2017; Jensen, 2017; Silva, 2007), which tend to be less accessible to students unless they have the means to purchase them. These resources could be available to students via institutional libraries, but that availability may vary (e.g., at the time this article was written, most of the books referenced here are currently out on loan).

Similarly, there is also literature that underscores the importance of mentoring graduate students through the publication process (Engstrom, 2003; Kamler, 2008; O'Hara et al., 2019; Simpson & Matsuda, 2008; Titus & Ballou, 2013); however, not all students receive this sort of mentorship, so many go without learning about the hidden curriculum (Elliot et al., 2016; Eraut, 2007) and unspoken tricks of the publishing trade. This breadth of literature on a constellation of topics related to the publishing process that may not be accessible to many doctoral students motivated us to write this article. We wanted to put what we consider to be the most pertinent information on the publication process in one place that is accessible to our audience. We see this article as a synthesis of what is already known in this process, funneled through our collective experience, and shared in our own individual words to bring to light scholarly publishing elements that are not always explicit. Additionally, we endeavor to present our experiences and what "we individually and collectively" have found to be successful, as opposed to presenting only one avenue to success in publishing.

Approach to this Work

The form of the article matches the function. Though we designed this article to share our collective recommendations and advice, we also wanted it to reflect our individual experiences and ideas. In this way, we chose to embed our own quotations in conversation with each other. Even amongst ourselves there are different ways to approach a topic or practice, and we wanted this manuscript to reflect that to the reader. As we thought about our experiences with the publication process, we wanted to explore some of the major lessons we learned and would want to share with our own doctoral students to prepare them for this work.

Over the last six years, all three of us have been part of a writing productivity group together with other junior faculty members. Though the group has changed over time, we have been each other's constant companions navigating the publication process. Moreover, being faculty mentors to several doctoral-level students, we tried to think about ways to help our students navigate the publication process as well. We have had numerous conversations about this process during this time, which eventually led to us embarking on this specific project. Once it became clear to us that we wanted to create a product to help guide doctoral students through the publication process, we began to be more systematic about our approach. Starting at the beginning of 2020 we set up bi-weekly video-conference meetings with one another to workshop ideas, read and discuss existing literature, and determine the broader topics that we thought were important to cover. Through our article, we seek to encourage doctoral students to be active participants in the publication process by highlighting the areas where they can make informed choices and decisions.

Guiding Questions

1. What are some of the major stages of the publication process?
2. What are some of the key decision-points where authors have agency during the publication process?
    a. What information/understanding do scholars need to make these decisions effectively?
3. How can scholars effectively move papers forward through the different stages of this process?

Authors' Backgrounds

Before we embark on sharing our recommendations, we also acknowledge the impact of personal and professional experiences on this article. All three of the authors in this process were hired together at the same university in 2016, and for most of our pre-tenure years we met weekly in a writing group to support each other in the development of our research agendas. Together we have transitioned into these professional roles and worked through the expectations and pressures of academic scholarship in tenure-track positions, with all three of us successfully achieving tenure. Additionally, we all work in the same Ph.D. in Education program at our university, and two of us also work in the Ed.D. in Educational Leadership program as well. These experiences have brought us to collaborate on this article, as we work through the academic publishing process ourselves while also mentoring doctoral students to share our experiences and knowledge with them. However, we each brought different experiences and training to this role, as we each specialize in different fields in education (i.e., research methodology, higher education, and special education), and we were each trained at different institutions with different mentoring and formal education experiences. We all work in the same system and structure now, and we have all wrestled together with aspects of the "hidden curriculum" and barriers in academia, but we each do this in unique ways and have our own processes and methods to our scholarship that we share in this writing now.

Sarah Ferguson, Ph.D.

Sarah is an associate professor of quantitative methods, with research in two areas: (a) working to improve the teaching and support of students and early career researchers in statistics and research methods, and (b) applied research focusing on supporting students exploring and engaging in careers in STEM technician and technologist fields. Her work in both methodology and applied research has forced her to find balance between these two disparate fields of research, and her work in career development also sits at the cross section of multiple fields of literature (e.g., education, psychology, STEM, etc.). Working in and between these research areas and fields of study has brought challenges and a unique perspective and skill with navigating these different fields and the approaches common to them. She has experience publishing in journals across multiple fields, many with student co-authors mentored in the process, and has been Evaluator, Co-PI, and PI on national research grants.

As a student at a Research 2 Institution (i.e., a doctoral university with high research productivity), she benefited from mentoring in evaluation, grant writing, and writing papers for publication. However, this was a result of her privilege as a full time Ph.D. student, able to take time away to work on research projects in addition to courses and teaching. This is not a privilege available to all students, and recognition of this is part of the motivation for this work.

Cecile Sam, Ph.D.

Cecile is an associate professor of educational leadership who focuses her qualitative research on faculty work and ethics in K–20 contexts. She is particularly interested in exploring the potential of ethical mindfulness and unethical leadership. Her prior position included being a qualitative researcher at a grant-funded research center at an Ivy League institution for four years, conducting policy and program evaluation. Because of her varied interests across education, Cecile has experience publishing in both K–12 focused and higher education journals, and one of the skills she has been developing is writing conceptual manuscripts for peer-reviewed journals.

After earning her undergraduate and master’s degrees from a liberal arts university, she attended a Research 1 Institution (i.e., a doctoral university with the highest levels of research productivity) for her doctorate. Within the first month, she recognized that her experience and understanding of research was severely limited, compared to other students coming from other research institutions. However, she was fortunate enough to be able to work closely with faculty (e.g., she was her advisor’s only graduate research assistant for two-plus years) who helped her make up for lost ground. She learned to write academic papers through an apprenticeship model with her advisor, starting as second author, then first author, then sole author. Though this worked well for her, she realizes that not everyone could or would want to experience a similar model.

Brent Elder, Ph.D.

Brent is an associate professor of special education who engages in a variety of collaborative writing partnerships including co-authoring with graduate students, professors, P–12 teachers and administrators, and parents of children with disabilities. Through these partnerships, he publishes in a variety of outlets, both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed. He has experience publishing top-tier academic journals, practitioner journals, book chapters, reports for non-governmental organizations, and blogs. In addition to enjoying the process of co-authorship, he also enjoys mentoring graduate students through the publication process which oftentimes involves explaining the hidden or unsaid aspects of the publication process, which we discuss throughout this article.

As a doctoral student, he attended a Research 1 Institution and had very limited experience conducting research of his own, let alone turning papers into publications. Fortunately, his university provided a lot of flexibility and choice within doctoral courses so he could infuse his research interests into his course work. Additionally, he was allowed to choose his faculty mentors over time, which provided mentorship as he attempted to negotiate the research-to-publication process. Through his coursework, faculty mentorship, and developing writing partnerships with fellow doctoral students, he was able to publish on multiple occasions during his Ph.D. program. He draws heavily on these experiences now as an associate professor when working with Ph.D. students at his institution.

Presentation to Publication Process

Academic publishing is a hallmark of scholarly work, both as a key component of the process of inquiry in sharing knowledge with the wider academic community, and as a marker of scholarly productivity traditionally used to make decisions about hiring and tenure or promotion. However, publishing academic work is certainly easier said than done, particularly if your goal is to publish in top-tier journals where "impact" is highly rated. Academic publications take a lot of time and effort, and being effective in this process requires you to develop habits that streamline your time and result in getting the most out of the activities you choose to engage in. Thinking about publication as only the final product is an oversimplification of all the time and work that went into that piece before it ever made it to print. As Sarah notes:

> The first draft you ever write of a piece, whether it be for a course, a call for proposals, a book chapter, or for any other purpose, is very rarely in the same form as the final product. There is value in taking time to walk away from a piece to allow your thoughts to develop, continue reading in a field and refine your ideas, gain feedback from peers and mentors, and expand or limit the scope of the work.

The Triple Dip

Perhaps the best advice we received in graduate school related to the publication process was to "triple dip" to move a paper through the publication process from course paper to academic scholarship. This means, if you are going to go through the trouble of writing a paper for a course or local presentation (Dip One), then modify the paper into a more developed conference proposal so you can present on it (Dip Two), and ultimately turn the paper into a manuscript that you submit to a journal for publication (Dip Three). Related to the concept of triple dipping, Cecile had this to say, "I think about ways that coursework can be incorporated into potential publications. Not every assignment will be applicable, however many assignments could be viable presentations and publications." While it may be hard to write all your papers on your specific area(s) of interest, it helps if you have a general broad category of work you are interested in (e.g., methodology, higher education, inclusive education). This can help keep your doctoral work relatively connected and help you identify local/regional/national conferences where you can submit your work.

Two important notes here about this conversation. First, we refer to "triple dipping" as writing a paper, turning it into a conference proposal, and eventually a published paper or two published products. We are "not" referring to the unethical practice of self-plagiarism (sometimes termed "double-dipping") where students or academics publish substantial portions of a paper or article in more than one class, journal, or academic space. Second, the three "dips" in graduate school of course paper, conference presentation, and publication often change to a different series of "dips" as your career advances: presentation at a conference, publication in an empirical journal, and publication in a practitioner or public scholarship space. The overall theme is to consider how your work can develop into multiple products, without creating an unethical duplication of your work in multiple places.

Dip One: Course Products or Local/Regional Conferences. Completed papers from courses are often shared locally or at regional conferences; compared to national conferences, regional settings are typically more graduate student-friendly places where you can get constructively critical feedback on emerging work. It provides you with practice presenting your work to an audience, and it forces you to move your work from a proposal to a manuscript. Below, Cecile describes how submitting a conference proposal to complete a paper can be a good thing:

> Conference proposals may provide that hard deadline for completing a paper that rarely exists outside of coursework and grants. I have used conference proposals as places to test out ideas for papers that I have been working on, but not wholly committed all my time. Of course, if accepted, it means that I need to produce something of good quality because the idea will be tested in a roomful of strangers.

In addition to helping to move work forward, regional conferences are typically less expensive than national conferences, you can attend them for one day if needed to save on cost, and they can be wonderful and safe spaces to present newly-formed ideas.

Dip Two: National Conferences. As you garner and then apply peer feedback from your initial conference presentations, your ideas become more fine-tuned. This enables you to craft a more formal presentation that you can then consider submitting to a national conference. Related to choosing a conference, Sarah has this advice to offer:

> Presenting your work to other scholars is intimidating, and it is not always a positive experience when students or early scholars do not receive support for their work. But it can be a critical part of development for a piece as you engage in conversations with other scholars who might bring new ideas or theories to your attention. They might even catch things in your work that you did not see and that you could correct or explain further in the next iteration.

While national conference spaces may be intimidating and more expensive to attend, it provides a further opportunity to sharpen your work and create a completer and more summative piece of work. These conferences are an opportunity to receive more critical feedback from leaders in the field, and move your manuscript forward even closer to publication.

Dip Three: Journal Publication. Once you feel you have received enough feedback from colleagues and other scholars/professionals in the field, you want to be thinking about where you want the work to be published. We often tell doctoral students, "look at where the scholars you admire publish, and aim to have your name in that same journal." While that might not be where you will land initially, it is good to have high goals for yourself. Related to this, Brent had this to say about journal choice:

> You may start at a top-tier journal and work your way down the line in terms of impact factor. Through this process, you will familiarize yourself with what sort of work top-tier journals are publishing and how they compare to lower-tier journals. This provides an opportunity to observe trends of what journals have been publishing and identify where your work fills a gap or expands the conversation.

Other considerations when looking for a home for your work include: (a) understanding the Open Access guidelines of the journal; (b) knowing how your work will be disseminated post-publication; and (c) deciding whether your work should live in a qualitative journal, a quantitative journal, or in a more conceptual/theoretical space. Finally, look carefully at the author guidelines and follow them. If you do not, you risk getting a "desk reject" where the editor does not pass your work along to reviewers because you did not follow directions.

In this section, we have presented "research" as a triple dipping publishing process, and highlighted the explicit steps we routinely take in order to get a high-quality final published product. It may take years for a project to be "finished," and to be published in a journal article form. In the next section, we move beyond the triple dipping approach to publishing and discuss the intricacies involved in choosing a journal in which to publish.

Journal Choice and Preparing for Journal Submission

Developing a publishing process that is both effective and ends in a high-quality manuscript is challenging. But, finding the right journal through which to publish your work is also a critical component of the publication process to consider. There are many factors to consider that can vary as widely as your paper topics. Specifically, we had three major themes in our conversation about journal choice: choosing a journal, writing the article, and preparing for submission. Understanding the logistics and process of knowing where to publish is a useful skill to develop early on in your career.

Choosing a Journal

When considering where to submit a publication-ready manuscript, Brent offers the following advice:

> When writing a paper, I think through where I would like it 'to live.' Meaning, I think about the top three potential journal outlets where I think the work would make new and important contributions. To start, research the impact factor of each potential journal through a search of each journal's web page or a search on *Journal Citation Reports* (2021) and I look at *CABELLS Scholarly Analytics* (2022) to get an idea of the acceptance rates, how many issues they publish each year, word count, the publishing style, the aims and scope, and things of that nature. If the review process is not rigorous or my work falls outside the aim and scope, I move on.

Where Cecile tends to look at journal metrics and aims and scope first, Sarah chooses journals in a different way:

> I am usually more focused on checking the fit of my manuscript to the journal, and then I look at journal impact factors and other metrics. Impact factor is one measure of a journal's quality, but it has known issues and is not always helpful in all fields to really understand how an article will be utilized (Medina & Draugalis, 2019; Roemer & Borchardt, 2012). While my methodological work can be supported with traditional metrics easier, my applied research in STEM career development often makes more sense in alternative metrics (like those reported by Altmetrics, 2022) focused on practitioner use of the work instead of academic citations (Medina & Draugalis, 2019; Roemer & Borchardt, 2012). So, I spend more time reading through the aims and scope of a journal,

> comparing my work to recent publications, and looking at the type of work they have been publishing recently in terms of topics, theories, and methodologies.

By contrast, Cecile explains how her approach to journal choice differs from Brent and Sarah:

> While it is important to be mindful of the journals where you are sending your papers, in graduate school I was told something slightly different. I was told to look at your paper and seriously assess the "quality" of the work. We can usually publish two or more different papers from one study, depending on how big the study is. However, not all papers are created equal. If the manuscript is your strongest work with the most interesting findings and with the broadest impact, then submit it to the most prestigious top-tier journal in your field.

When we talk about traditional metrics for journals, we are usually referring to the Impact Factor, which is a numerical score calculated based on the number of times articles from the last two years have been cited in a publication year for a given journal. There are other traditional metrics, like the h-index, but all of these tend to focus on citation counts and a set equation. By contrast, alternative metrics take other aspects of "impact" into account, including reads, downloads, readership, mentions on social media, etc. This type of metric is not always numerical, and provides more context on the use of the work broadly. In addition to what we have stated above, it is important to be honest with yourself, and decide if your work is not a good fit for a journal. Submitting a paper that is not a good fit wastes time when you could have submitted a paper to a journal where your work is a good fit and would be under review.

Writing the Paper

Once you identify your first-choice journal where you want to publish, then you must write the paper. The focus of the present article is not to cover the mechanics of writing a research article. Instead, we provide some specific advice on targeting your paper to a specific journal, regardless of the type or purpose of the article you are writing. To keep his writing focused on the journal's aims and scope, Brent does the following:

> I cut and paste a summary of the aim and scope at the top of my paper outline and try to keep my writing focused on a few main points that stand out to me that define the journal. This helps keep my writing focused even as my work grows and evolves. As my paper takes shape, I periodically return to the journal and make sure I am within the aims and scope. I also download a few recent article exemplars so I can write in a style and format that are familiar to the editor and reviewers.

Cecile adds:

> I also like to find one or two articles from the same journal that I feel speaks to my topic and had good organization and flow. I then use those articles to map out a general outline of my own paper. I'm not copying their words. Instead, I'm looking at general structure: how long is their intro? Where do they put in the research questions? Approximately how many paragraphs are dedicated to each section? Once I get down a general outline with limits, I start to fit my own work into that structure.

When you are publishing in a journal, you are not publishing your work for others to read in isolation. You are fundamentally engaging with the community and audience of that journal in an ongoing conversation about a topic of interest. This understanding shifts the way we think about writing and publishing away from the "means to an end" format we often take up in writing for class purposes, but this difference is not always made clear to researchers early in their publishing process.

Preparing for Journal Submission

As you continue to write your paper and it nears completion, there are several things that have to happen that are not always discussed with doctoral students. Below, Brent outlines additional tasks he takes on in addition to editing his paper into a final draft:

> As my paper nears completion, I start to draft a cover letter to the editor. Writing a cover letter was something that no one in my PhD program ever taught me or spoke about. When I attempted to submit my first manuscript for review, it came up as a complete surprise to me and I had to ask my mentors and fellow doctoral students for examples. By and large, my cover letters include the same information: (a) the editor's address/contact information, (b) a brief pleasant greeting, (c) a concise paragraph summarizing the main points similar to the abstract, (d) an acknowledgement of IRB approval (if relevant), and (e) I identify myself as the corresponding author and include the number of figures, tables, and words.

In addition to the approach Brent takes, Sarah adds the following:

> I have a general format for my letters as well: (a) a greeting addressed to the editor directly, (b) a statement of the manuscript title we are submitting that identifies the journal it is being sent to and confirming that it is not under consideration elsewhere, (c) a paragraph summarizing the manuscript and clearly identifying the contribution it is intended to make to the field, (d) a paragraph clearly stating why I selected that particular journal and why I think this work is a good fit, and (e) a closing statement.

The overall goal with cover letters to editors is essentially the same as a cover letter for a job application. You want to highlight key elements of the work for the editor and make the case for why your paper should be considered for this outlet. To the point above and aims and scope of the journal, your cover letter is your place to make the case for your work in the conversations and directions the journal has been publishing. This helps to draw the editor's attention to the role the manuscript can potentially play in contributing to the broader conversation and literature the journal is engaged with.

It is important to note that journal "quality" is an ongoing debate in every field, with traditional understandings of impact and quality often excluding critical and contentious articles by nature of the way journals work (Rele, 2021). When your work is pushing back against the systems or powers that be, you are going to have a harder time getting into higher ranked journals, and that has a direct impact on your job performance or tenure metrics. Editors have a lot of sway in their journals, and if the editor does not like what you are writing about, they can reject the paper immediately with no recourse. By contrast, if an editor believes in what you are doing, they can help shepherd the work along the review process, even if some of the reviewers do not like the paper. Moving beyond submitting a manuscript to a journal, once you receive a review decision from the editor about your manuscript, the editing process begins. Editing and re-working manuscripts is the focus of the next section.

Revision a Communal Process

One of the themes in our dialogue focused on the editing and revision process for manuscripts. More specifically, it highlighted that for all three of us, it was not always a process done alone. Rather, we discussed how a key part of the editing and revision process actually involved critical friends (e.g., other scholars that we know, including one another) who were willing to provide feedback and edits on our manuscripts before we submitted to a journal. This theme makes sense since all three of us have experienced some form of peer editing in our own graduate coursework, and have carried it over to the courses we teach. However, what is different in this theme is that rather than being assigned a peer to exchange papers and provide feedback, we have to navigate this process on our own. From our conversations about this communal process, three ideas emerged in this communal process of revision: (a) knowing who to ask, (b) knowing when and how to ask, and (c) knowing how to reciprocate.

Knowing Who to Ask

Asking colleagues or faculty mentors for help to revise your manuscript can be difficult. Sarah explains that in her situation:

> I have struggled with the peer editing idea, somewhat because I struggle with asking for this kind of help, and partially because my work crosses over disciplinary lines in ways that don't always fit the expertise of some of my colleagues.

However, once you have colleagues or mentors willing to review your work, it can help move your manuscript along the publication pipeline. Sarah continues, "When I do find someone with a good fit to a work and get their read first, the paper is always stronger and more developed as a result." This notion of a good fit is important because not everyone necessarily would be a good choice depending on what you need. In Sarah's situation, it may not make sense to ask a colleague lacking in content expertise to review a paper for content. Below, Cecile explains how she thinks about the different roles that reviewers can play:

> With my own work, I have good colleagues/friends with different strengths. Some people are great with knowing the literature in the field and can point to gaps in content, while others are "methods magicians." Similarly, some people are great cheerleaders, while others, to put it nicely, engulf your paper in flames so that a stronger paper emerges.

Depending on the specific context of that manuscript, Cecile thinks about "who might be the better fit for the request at hand." People need not be all things as a reviewer for your work, and knowing what you need and who can best meet that need can help make the process more efficient.

Knowing When and How to Ask

Across the board, all three of us prefer not to ask others for last minute reviews on full papers, barring special circumstances or close relationships. Brent explains that "Making 'the ask' of a colleague needs to be well-timed." Compared to last-minute requests and quick turn-around times, providing as much time between the request and the return can give your colleague the flexibility, they need to help you. Cecile tries to provide as much information on the task, as a courtesy to her colleagues and their time, "Ideally, I first ask people if they'd be willing or available to look at my paper, give them the scope or length, and explain when I could get them the draft." She does this because this is some of the same information she needs when others ask her to review their work. She adds, "As a faculty member I'm usually happy and willing to give feedback on student papers, but I have to build that time into my own schedule, and I can give my best work when I have enough time." When asking a colleague to review work, Sarah suggests, "Be thoughtful about how you ask for help, about what work you are requesting of colleagues, and what you really need from someone." A person may not need to read the entire manuscript, and if working on a short time frame, it may make sense to streamline your request. Further, Brent explains:

> Make it easy on them. Tell them which sections they can skim, and which sections you want them to take a deep dive into. This not only saves them time, but it also helps them focus their attention on the areas you need the most feedback on.

Cecile follows a similar process depending on the individual situation and says, "You could ask them to look at one section of your paper, or to provide feedback on your arguments and not proofread." Unbundling the tasks of revision can help get the needed feedback with less of a burden on your colleague.

This section does not exclude last-minute requests to review work, because sometimes there is an unexpected deadline, or a person may need a quick review in order to move the process along. Each of us have done so at one point or another, but we try to weigh the task, and we consider the time and the closeness of the professional connection. Similarly, asking co-authors to review work differs from asking a non-author, as Sarah makes this distinction, "This is different in collaborative pieces, where your 'peer editor' is often your co-authors, while in a single-author-paper it looks more like an outside colleague editing as a favor or professional courtesy." Co-authors usually have an expectation of shared responsibility for revising work, where another colleague will not.

Knowing How to Reciprocate

Reciprocity is an important factor when asking colleagues to take time to review work and provide feedback. Cecile explains why she feels like it is important to also be available to help others, "You are creating your own community of learners, and that means being willing to do the same for other people." As scholars grow and develop professionally, so too will their network of scholars and colleagues. Brent adds that it is never too soon to begin making important connections, "As you are developing collaborative research and writing partnerships in graduate school, it is a great time to start exchanging papers and providing constructively critical feedback to colleagues." Reciprocity can be viewed as an ethical obligation to an academic community, to help ensure that a person is enriching the experience rather than exploiting it (MacFarlane, 2005).

There are two important parts of reciprocity. The first is knowing your own strengths and time limitations, and being upfront with the person who is making the request. There have been times when Cecile has had to tell students that though she is unable to read the whole paper, but she "can take a look at specific paragraphs or an outline." The second is trying to do the best work you are able, as Brent explains:

> When I give a colleague's paper a deep read, I preface my feedback with, "Feel free to take my comments or leave them. I tend to be very direct and constructively critical with feedback." I also note that "constructively critical" does not equal "mean." However, I want to give my colleague the best feedback I can, so I am direct and honest about my thoughts on their papers.

Reciprocity is very much like the proverbial "Golden Rule" of reviewing: review unto others as you want others to review unto you.

The Journal Response

Submitting to a journal is just the first step of another process in academic writing. Not being immediately accepted by a journal is not a sign of failure, but rather a part of the review and revision process that accompanies scholarly work. Reviewer and editor feedback is meant to improve the quality of your work, but it also can be an exercise in compromise, and it generally requires a clear justification of your ideas and decisions in the manuscript you submitted (Voice of Young Science, 2016; Wiley Author Services, 2021a). In this section we will first review the possible journal decisions you could receive, and then unpack themes from the experiences we have had with reviews and revisions, and our advice on tackling reviews.

Overview of Possible Journal Decisions

When you submit a paper to a journal for review, there are a series of answers or decisions that you can receive back from the editor and/or journal editorial team (Conn, 2017; Wiley Author Services, 2021b). Be aware that these terms are not universal, and different journals may use slightly different wording in their decisions, so check the journal submission information, the journal website, and/or email the editor directly for clarity on what a decision means if you are unclear. Generally speaking, you are likely to receive one of the following responses: (a) "reject without review" (also known as a "desk reject"), (b) "accept with minor revisions," (c) "accept with major revisions," (d) "revise and resubmit" (or sometimes reject and encourage resubmission), and (e) "reject after review."

With decision (a), a "reject without review" might actually mean one of two things: there is something wrong with what was submitted and we need you to correct something before we can send it out for review (e.g., you did not take the author names off of the manuscript file, or an image did not upload correctly); or the editor(s) do not feel this piece is a good fit for this journal and recommend you send it elsewhere. As Sarah notes, "In the first case you can make the corrections and re-submit for consideration, but in the second case you have been rejected from this journal and need to find another outlet that better fits the paper you are presenting."

Decision (b), "accept with minor revisions" is rather uncommon for a first round of review, but as Sarah notes, "If that is the decision, celebrate! Your paper is getting published!" Brent also noted that this is extremely rare for a first decision, and he says, "More than likely, you will have a fairly large amount of revisions to take on before you get to this response." Minor revisions will generally be writing or style corrections and changes, expanding explanations, maybe reworking a table or figure, and things that require a minimal amount of change to the original manuscript and usually do not change the substance of the work.

Likewise, Sarah notes that decision (c), "accept with major revisions," "This is also a cause for celebration, you are getting published!" This decision generally involves more substantive changes requested by the reviewers and/or editor, maybe adding or changing the literature review, expanding on the methodology or analysis approach, detailing the limitations and implications of the work, etc. Sarah notes that "These changes will require more effort, and your response to these changes will need to be detailed clearly and then go back to the reviewers for a second look to make sure they approve the changes."

Decision (d), "revise and resubmit" (commonly called "an R&R") or "reject and encourage resubmission" are also positive, but Sarah cautions, "Do not celebrate just yet!" This decision means the editorial team sees promise in this manuscript, and they feel like it could be a good contribution to the journal, but there are major substantive changes to be made that might require reworking whole sections of the manuscript or even running new analyses. Additionally, Sarah explains that "Responses to this decision will require a detailed and clear response to each comment from the reviewers, and it will go back to the reviewers for another review and another decision." Responses to reviewers are unpacked further in a section below with advice and suggestions to tackle this process.

And finally, a journal can make the decision (e), "reject," and you will need to explore other options for the manuscript. As Sarah explains:

> This decision is often given when the reviewers comments indicate the work is not ready for publication due to incomplete sections, the methods are not appropriate for the work or have major flaws/errors, the authors did not engage with specific bodies of literature or theory that are key to the particular topic of interest, the work does not contribute to the current conversation in the field or is out of sync with current work, or a number of other reasons along this same track.

But Cecile also notes that "There is also the more mundane issue where the reviewer/editor misread a section or missed an argument entirely." You do have recourse to appeal a decision with an editor, but sometimes the better approach is to find another journal that is a better fit to the work you are presenting.

Experiences and Challenges with Manuscript Review

Additionally, there are a number of challenges or experiences themes that arose from our conversations and that you may have beyond the decisions and process of manuscript reviews and editor decisions. Specifically, we discussed themes of (a) the timeline of the review process, (b) the argument for and against aiming for higher journals than a manuscript will likely be accepted in, and (c) the process and advice around responding to reviewers.

Timeline for Review. One major challenge of manuscript review is the time that it takes to move a manuscript forward from submission to acceptance and on to publication. A single review cycle can take anywhere from a month or two, and up to six months or more. The time depends on the journal and the speed at which editors are able to get reviewers to agree to review the work, and then get reviews back and return them to the authors. And as Sarah notes, "This stage of the process is usually silent, in that you will not get notifications or updates on where your manuscript is in the process until it is completed." If the journal uses a website system to manage submissions you can usually log in to check the status in the system yourself, otherwise you need to be patient and wait for a response. If you go six months or more with no news, it is appropriate to reach out to the editor for an update. Sarah notes this can be as simple as a brief email to the effect of "Following up on the status of manuscript #XXXXX," as this will remind the editors to follow up on the reviewers on their end.

Aiming High. Connected to this issue of timeline, note that sometimes advisors or mentors will suggest sending a manuscript to a higher "quality" journal with the hope of getting good feedback in reviews, even if it ultimately gets rejected. As Sarah notes:

This is fine, but also acknowledge this can add a lot of time to the lifecycle of the article. You might wait a few months for the first review feedback and then get rejected, then send it out to a new journal, wait months for new review feedback, and then hopefully you can start negotiating the review comments and revisions.

Be thoughtful about the time you have as you make decisions about sending a manuscript to a specific journal and make a targeted decision on the quality or level of journal that seems most appropriate for the manuscript.

Response to Reviewers. Once you have a decision that involves responding to reviewer comments, there are several considerations to unpack about the way you organize your response. This is your space to respond to each comment, explain what you changed in response, what you did not change, why you made that choice, and point the reviewer and editor to the place in the new manuscript where this change appears. As Brent notes, "If you have three reviewers each with 10 comments or more, even knowing where to begin editing your manuscript can feel like a monumental task." Combine this with a tight turnaround time for revisions, and there is a real need to be organized in your approach. Brent suggests starting with the easier tasks first, noting:

> I identify which revisions are the easiest and start there. This oftentimes gives me the momentum to take on the harder revisions in due time. I try to chunk the revisions out over a number of days (e.g., five revisions/day for one week) so I chip away at the task over time).

The format of your response to revisions can take a couple of different forms, but generally we have seen this formatted as either a table or a narrative. In a table format, like the example below in Table 1, you will list each comment from each reviewer down the rows of column 1, and then detail your response and changes in that appropriate row down column 2. Sarah notes that,

> This table format is clear, concise, and easy to navigate, and is my preference when possible for revisions. However, if you are asked to provide the response in a textbox on the journal manuscript submission website, the formatting of this table will not be an option and you will need to change to the narrative format.

By contrast, the narrative format, as shown in Figure 1 below, has you share the same information as is contained in Table 1, but it is formatted down the page in a narrative flow instead of across the table.

Table 1
Example of Types of Responses to Reviewer Comments

Reviewer 1 Comment	Type of Response	Author Response
You might want to include a section about next steps in research. As I see it, you could go deeper with the participants by following them in the actual context or, alternatively, move up a bit by designing some national or regional survey building on your categories. Perhaps administer surveys of faculty?	Agree with the reviewer and will make the change	On page 25, we have included a new section "Future directions for research" to incorporate the suggestions of following up with participants, or with faculty in similar positions. We also expanded the idea of the survey to our "Implications for Practice" section that looks at having a national survey and helping build a consortium of engaged scholars.
Methodology: It is very important, scientifically, to mention: the validity and reliability in the research design as it's a requirement for both quantitative and qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2007) and takes different forms.	Partially agree with the reviewer and had to adjust change	I agree with the reviewer that something is needed to support the methodology of this study. However, rather than using validity and reliability, which lends to a more post-positivist framework for the qualitative study, I chose to promote trustworthiness and how I used three means to obtain that for the study, which better aligns with my qualitative methods.
The research questions of this article are vague and not so much interesting.	Disagree	Respectfully, we disagree with Reviewer 2 and support the contribution of these research questions further on page X.

Figure 1
Example Response to Reviewer in Narrative Format

3. A key question I had was how the present study was different than/built upon the quantitative review of 78 U.S. studies over five decades by Miller, Nolla, Eagly, & Uttal (2018). Has this work already been done recently?

We have included language indicating that the purpose of their study was to examine change in children's gender-science stereotypes through a review of the literature, compared to the purpose of our article which was to analyze the use of the DAST-C through a review of the literature. Our clarification can be found on pages 5-6:

A quantitative review of 78 U.S. studies over five decades suggests that a majority of students still tend to draw male scientists in response to the DAST prompt, and frequency increases with students' age but has decreased over historical time (Miller, Nolla, Eagly, & Uttal, 2018). Although that study was expansive in its goal to examine change in children's gender-science stereotypes, it differs from this present study that aims to analyze the use of the DAST-C as a whole through the application of meta-analysis.

Note. Text in **bold** is reviewer comment, text in *italics* is the author's response, and text in plain format was copied directly from the manuscript.

Sarah suggests a detailed approach to revision responses, whether in the narrative or table format. Specifically, she puts the reviewer comments in **bold** font at the start of each section, then responds to the comment in *italics* to mark this as her explanation, includes a reference to the pages the changes appear in the manuscript, and then copy and paste the section of the text that is being referenced from the manuscript (see Figure 1). She does note this approach is not an actual requirement for journals, but rather an effort to preempt negative responses from reviewers, sharing:

> I find it helps save time for the reviewers and allows me to clearly point out what changes were made and where they are located. One time I had a reviewer comment that I had not addressed any of their concerns, even though we had re-run the entire analysis and rewritten significant portions of the work in response to their comments. So, the method of copying and pasting the text into the response letter became a habit from that point forward, to at least be able to show exactly what we changed.

Cecile also notes that you do not actually have to make every change that the reviewers recommend, though you do need to respond to each of their suggestions. She notes that:

> Sometimes reviewers may recommend a change that is either inappropriate for your paper (e.g., provide quantitative numbers for code frequencies as evidence for a qualitative study), or will ask you to add something that would take the paper in an entirely different direction.

In these situations, it is helpful to remember that reviewers and journal revisions are a space of compromise, and you must make decisions about what you are willing to give to the journal and what you want to put your foot down about. Sarah agrees and notes that:

> You need to take these review comments somewhat seriously, as the reviewers and/or editors believed these things to be true when they said them. But also note that sometimes this is an issue of bad fit to a journal, or the reviewers do not really understand the approach you took. Be honest with yourself about what comments you can build on for a future version of the paper, and what comments you are choosing strategically to ignore as they do not align with the vision you have for this work.

Additionally, Cecile points out the value of checking your work to evaluate areas of misunderstanding or pieces that lack clarity, to "look at your paper to see if you could further clarify or make more apparent anything your reviewer may have misread or missed." This then follows with the focus on compromise and crafting a clear explanation for any comments where you have chosen to not make changes. For Cecile, the importance is in the response back to the reviewers and editors, sharing her process:

> I start by recognizing how the comment is valuable and where I made concessions, but ultimately, I explain why I will not be implementing their recommendation. The key is making an argument why you've chosen NOT to include the recommendation and be sure it is well-supported.

However, it is important to know that the things you are not willing to compromise on might mean you don't get accepted to that journal if the reviewers and/or editor feel like you are not responding to their suggestions. As Sarah argues:

> If the reviewers and/or editors are not satisfied with your revisions, they can come back the next round with a 'reject' decision or even with another "R&R" decision, and the process repeats. I have personally had a paper go through two rounds of R&R and then be rejected, and another paper that went through three rounds of R&R and was then accepted.

Like Cecile though, Sarah argues that you should, "Make the case for your work and your choices in your response to the reviewers." In the end, be prepared for any decision you may get next, in terms of an acceptance, further revisions, or a rejection, and do your best to support the decisions you made in the responses you crafted to the revisions. Table 2 presents the different types of responses we can give to reviewers based on varying degrees of agreement.

In this section, we have presented a brief overview of the common decisions you will receive from journals when you submit a manuscript for review. Additionally, we have explored three concepts within the review process that we feel needed further unpacking, specifically issues of timing, aiming for high-quality journals, and responding to reviewer feedback. Of note in this process is the need to compromise where feedback and comments will improve the work, while also standing by your writing when you fundamentally disagree with the comments you have received. The journal review process can be frustrating at times, but the overall goal is to formalize your manuscript into a tightly crafted and clearly explained academic piece that is ready for a wider audience.

Conclusion

In writing this article, our aim was to provide doctoral students who have limited access to faculty mentorship with accessible information on the academic process of scholarship and publishing. In addition to providing readers with current literature on scholarship and publishing in one location, we hope our autoethnographic approach helps to personalize and clarify such nebulous aspects of the publication process. Specifically, through this approach we shared how we make informed decisions about how to publish our work, we explained how we collectively navigate the challenges inherent in the publication pipeline, and discussed how we effectively move our papers through various stages of the publication process. We understand that this article is not exhaustive in its scope of resources and advice for the publication process, but we feel it is a good place to start for those looking for resources to supplement a lack of formal mentorship in their respective doctoral programs.

Implications and Recommendations

We have realized through this process it is difficult to “know what you do not know” especially during our early experiences as doctoral students. Future research on how students understand the publication process, or what faculty wished they learned earlier in their career, can help faculty mentors better identify ways they can support their students. It can also help identify gaps in our own mentoring and socialization of new scholars.

In addition to capturing the implications of us writing this article, we also want to highlight the implications for doctoral students reading this article. After reading this, we want students to have concrete and practical next steps they can take to learn more about the publication process and find publishing success in their respective fields. For some, this article may inspire them to create a writing group. For others, perhaps this article will be the motivation they need to revisit an old course paper and begin preparing it for publication.

Maybe this article will be someone’s motivation to begin researching prospective journals and learn more about publishing trends in that field in the past few years. Or, reading this article might encourage someone to begin reading seminal work in a new field and explore a website like Connected Papers (2021) and learn about the lineage of their field. Whatever your next steps, we hope you have learned something useful from this article and that you take even one seemingly small step in a new publication-oriented direction.

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